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The Competition Fetish in Higher Education : Shamans, Mind Snares and Consequences

Rajani Naidoo

Abstract

Contemporary education reform worldwide appears to be locked in a competition fetish. This article explores the varieties of competition, including traditional academic forms, contests sponsored by governments and international organisations, market competition and status wars intensified by rankings. Resisting interpretations of competition as naturally occurring, it presents various macro and micro actors, referred to as 'shamans', that breathe life into the phenomenon and that are responsible for its generation, constitution and reproduction. These include structural drivers associated with political and regulatory regimes; and symbolic drivers constituted by normative and affective pressures. The article focuses on the extent to which the varieties of competition reinforce, displace, mediate or counteract one another and reveals how powerful policy and symbolic drivers interact to power competition, and how competition forecloses alternative means of educational reform. The unintended consequences of competition on social equity, on academic work and on global well-being are highlighted, and suggestions are offered on ways to escape the competition trap.

Keywords

Competition, excellence contests, fetish, neoliberal higher education, ranking, world-class

Introduction

Education reform worldwide appears to be locked in a competition fetish. The imperative for change in higher education is more and more concerned with the master economic imaginary of the knowledge economy, a hegemonic discourse inextricably linked to the idea of global competition that frames political, economic and intellectual strategies and affects a wide range of institutional fields (Jessop et al, 2008). The intensification of the struggle for positional advantage in the global economy, the enhanced global mobility of corporate research and development and the competition for highly skilled knowledge workers have contributed to a fierce competition within and between national systems of higher education. In addition, powerful trans-national configurations have entered the fray. Competition in

higher education is related to, and sits in parallel with, global economic competition. It comes with its own set of rules, established by those institutions and systems already judged to be 'the best' on an international scale.

This article explores the constitution, variety, drivers and consequences of the phenomena of competition in higher education. The higher education literature has in general focussed on the analysis of specific types of competition such as market competition (Ainley, 2004; Bok, 2003; Brown 2011; Marginson, 1997) and status competition (Yonezawa et al 2002; Locke et al, 2008; Hazelkorn, 2015). However, there has been little in-depth focus on the combination of material and emotional drivers that power competition; and the ways in which various types of competition interact. This article begins by arguing that competition has become so prevalent in higher education that it can be referred to as a fetish. The varieties of competition occurring in higher education and their interactions are outlined in the second section. Resisting interpretations of competition as a naturally occurring phenomenon, the third section presents various actors which generate and reproduce competition. Key consequences of unadulterated competition on equity, on academic work and on global wellbeing are presented. The article concludes by outlining strategies to escape the trap of the competition fetish.

Competition as Fetish

Drawing on insights from anthropology, psychoanalysis and political economy, the term fetish is deployed to explore the displacement of fundamental issues in higher education which are concealed by using the fetish as a surrogate (Pels, 1998; Tanaka, 2011). According to Pietz (1987), the term arose in anthropology during the late 15th century in the interaction between Portuguese merchants and communities living in West Africa. Fetishism as a concept had its origins in a spiritual discourse about objects that were considered to have special powers to make desires come true, to protect individuals and communities from harm and to secure insights into the future (Pietz 1985; Pietz and Apter, 1993). From political economy, the fetishisation of commodities refers to screening the underlying relations of production and translating relations between people into connections between things (Marx, 1965). In psychoanalysis, fetishism refers to an inanimate object or a part of the body becoming the focus of arousal; resulting in the fetish acting as a substitute

while simultaneously concealing the absence of what it is substituting for (Freud, 1950; 1962; Gamman and Makinen, 2004).

Insights from these disciplines offer a particularly fertile intellectual constellation to understand the phenomena of competition as a fetish in higher education. Drawing from these meanings, higher education can be seen to be trapped in a kind of magical thinking which results in the belief that competition will provide the solution to all the unsolved problems of higher education. Competition is expected to increase equity, enhance quality, lead to efficiency and protect against risk. The understanding of competition as a fetish alludes to a two-fold displacement that endows it with some kind of extra presence in the process of denying a specific fact. Competition thus has the power to enthrall and, at the same time, to distract attention from a disturbingly true state of affairs in higher education (Tanaka, 2011). These accounts also allude to powerful emotions at work. Emotionally, the fetish invokes feelings of power and pleasure as well as desire. Most importantly, the invisible hand of competition provides the means by which no-one is responsible for negative effects apart from the victims themselves.

Varieties of Competition

Competition in higher education takes many forms including intellectual competition, geo-political competition and various forms of status competition. It is important to differentiate different types of competition since the effects of competition do not occur in a one to one relationship (see also Krucken, 2017). As I will illustrate in the following sections, there are complex interactions between different forms of competition which may reinforce or displace certain competitive logics or combine into new hybrid forms.

A deeply embedded and long-standing competition in higher education revolves around intellectual work. The sociology of knowledge indicates that scholars have long engaged in various forms of rivalry which have both undermined competing scholarship as well as enhanced intellectual advances in various fields (Collins, 1998). The essence of this rivalry has been captured by Pierre Bourdieu's conception of higher education as a relatively autonomous field which has historically generated its own deeply ingrained rules, values and professional protocols (see, for

example, Bourdieu, 1988;1996) that were relatively independent from economic and political pressures (see also Mangez and Lienard, 2015). Struggles revolve around types of field-specific resource which Bourdieu termed ‘scientific capital’ which were symbolic resources invested with value by the elite in the field (Bourdieu, 1986). The hierarchical ordering of academics, faculties and universities was thus internally judged and then projected outwards and accepted as legitimate by external stakeholders. In the contemporary era, the competition for scientific capital remains strong but it is ever changing and other forms of competition are beginning to jostle for dominance.

The second form of competition is the contribution of higher education to geo-political rivalry in which powerful International organisations and global for profit corporations intertwine in complex ways with governments to win geo-political games. First, universities have become important components of national innovation systems for global competitiveness (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000; Mowery et al 2004). Universities are expected to produce and disseminate economically productive knowledge and train innovative knowledge workers. The transformation of higher education into a global commodity has also resulted in higher education itself becoming an industry for revenue generation (Naidoo, 2011). In the United Kingdom and Australia, the dominant rationale for attracting increasing numbers of international students is primarily to boost income at the institutional level and trade surpluses at the national level. In continental Europe and the United States of America, these revenue-generating aims are supplemented by the aim to attract, develop, and retain talent to produce innovation and generate longer-term value for the economy (Robertson, 2008).

Higher education also plays an important role in the race for influence through which powerful groups in influential nations assert their own preferred political, economic and cultural models (Naidoo, 2011). The powerful nations of Western Europe together with the United States have been joined by countries such as China which have enough influence to create multi-polar nodes of power and challenge global power relations (Henderson, 2008). Cultural influence in education has always occurred between countries indirectly through the hidden curriculum and through organisations such as the British Council and Confucius Institutes. More recently however, more explicit attempts have been made. In Iowa in the United States of

America, a Republican Senator proposed a bill to force public universities to consider political affiliation when hiring new faculty (Flaherty, 2017). The Hungarian government has threatened to close the research intensive Central European University which has worked to promote civic freedoms and democracy and has offered an impressive range of scholarships for refugees (Abbott, 2017). Often economic and political rationales are mutually reinforcing. As Eva Hartman (2008) and Enders and Westerheijden (2011) reveal, the export of Bologna to Africa and Latin America has aimed to both increase Europe's market share of higher education as well as its sphere of influence. Susan Robertson and Matt Kedzierski (2016) also develop an important analysis of the multifaceted factors that have resulted in Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and China becoming rival destinations for students from the West.

The third type of competition is generally termed 'excellence policies' and involves deliberate strategies by governments to develop or enhance vertical stratification in national systems. The core political aim is to identify those institutions which are, or have the potential to be 'world class' (Deem, Mok and Lucas, 2008; Ma, 2013; Huang, 2015). Funding is diverted to these institutions to provide positional advantage for the purposes of global competition. The policy initiatives to build world-class universities originated in China, which was followed by South Korea in 1999, Japan in 2002, and Malaysia in 2008. The United Kingdom was the forerunner in the European context in applying competitive measures to allocate research funding. This process has steadily assumed momentum since the first Research Assessment Exercise launched in 1986, and through subsequent iterations to the present Research Excellence Framework (Macilwain, 2009). More recent excellence initiatives in the United Kingdom have required universities to demonstrate the 'impact' of their research beyond academia (Watermeyer, 2016) and to measure teaching excellence (Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017). In some countries excellence policies have marked a break with long traditions of equality. The German Excellence Framework was launched in 2005 with the aim of equipping German universities to compete on a global scale by targeting funding on a competitive basis. As Kehm (2013) notes, this initiative has broken the tradition of universities being considered roughly equal in terms of prestige, quality and political treatment.

Universities also compete in more overt status wars to shape speculative value through global rankings (Brown, 2015). The proliferation of global rankings including the well known Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education World Reputation rankings and the Leiden University ranking, Rankings provide, as Wedlin (2011) has noted, rhetorical devices with potentially important material consequences—some of which get enacted as self-fulfilling prophecies. Enders (2015) has illustrated how rankings provide new tools for constructing legitimacy and positional advantage within the field of higher education by favouring a certain institutional logic based on research reputation while subordinating competing field logics. Rankings also open up spaces for corporate and media influence (Stack, 2016) and stimulate investments by government policy makers in line with the rules of the ranking game (Hazelkorn, 2015). An important paper by David (2016) illustrates how rankings are used to fabricate a larger than life threat of global competition to support neo-liberal reform. He demonstrates how rankings position elite English universities between the superiority of the United States of America and 'Asian ascent' and argues that this is fabricated through discursive ratchets rather than adherence to real numerical indicators.

While there is resistance to the application of market competition in higher education, there is less protest, with some important exceptions (see for example Ordorika and Llyod, 2015) around the competition associated with excellence policies and rankings. As Enders (2015) has noted, this is because excellence contests and rankings reinforce the traditional competition for scientific capital and research prestige and play to a sense of national pride. These factors reinforce dominant scientific capital in the field of higher education resulting in both legitimacy and power. However, it is important to note that excellence policies and rankings also follow logics and assumptions that have the potential to devalue traditional scientific capital by recontextualising scientific capital and subtly altering various relative weightings.

In the next section, I turn to the structures and actors that work to constitute and reproduce competition. In keeping with the competition fetish metaphor, I use the term 'shaman', a term which conceptualises a person in certain religions with special powers to control or influence events and who often ceremonially draws on 'fetish

objects'. I use the term to characterise the agent that breathes life into the competition fetish. I touch briefly on a small range of collective actors such as governments, international organisations and corporations and individual actors such as university leaders, academics and students to illustrate how competition is co-produced at different levels.

Shamanic Actors and Structures

In many countries, government is a key shamanic actor. There is increasing evidence of the rise of the competition state, which is a state that has abandoned public welfare and instead focusses on promoting returns from market forces in international settings (Cerny, 2010). Rather than tempering the market, increasing articulation between the state and the market occurs. While this articulation differs across time and space (see for example Valimaa, 2005; Mok, 2005; Marginson 2011), global trends indicate that in general governments are moving in the direction of creating the conditions for quasi-markets in higher education while market mechanisms are deployed to achieve political goals (Naidoo, 2008). In some parts of the world such as the United States of America, the neoliberal project has been linked to xenophobic identity politics combined with promises for new forms of protectionism against global competition for those considered 'real citizens'.

Second, international organizations also play a shamanic role. The World Bank embeds neoliberalism through structural adjustment programmes, conditions attached to loans and prescriptions for what is termed 'good governance' (Van Waeyenberge, 2011). Low income countries are urged to deregulate higher education and open up to international competition (Klees et al, 2012). Organisation such as the Organisation for European Co-operation and Development (OECD) also shapes the actions of key actors through global assessment, benchmarking and policy comparison (Luke, 2011). Manuel Cardoso and Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2017) reveal how educational systems are made comparable through standardized measurement which then serve as projection screens to urge policy makers to move education reform in a neo-liberal direction. This form of coercive social construction can be seen in the ways in which international organisations have shifted their perceptions of the education systems of Sweden and Norway. These countries were

once positioned as role models in education for the rest of the world. In contemporary times, however, the equitable principles of such systems have been challenged by the hegemony of neo-liberal competition and Sweden and Norway are now positioned by the OECD as countries in need of reform (Pettersson, Prøitz & Forsberg 2017).

Third, global corporations have become potent political actors with a clear agenda: to push as deeply as they can to open up public sector education to for-profit provision (Ball, 2018). Powerful transnational corporations have penetrated deep into governments to influence the inner workings of democracy (Barley, 2007; Monbiot, 2013) and are now part of the policy community where they attempt to influence regulation which enables their own expansion. In an era of neo-liberal deregulation, global corporations gain greater power to change the higher education policy space in their own interests by advocating and developing instruments of competition as internationally applicable for global efficiency (Shahjahan and Morgan 2016).

Actors Inside the University

The responses of university leaders to externally generated competitive mechanisms include recontextualising such pressures within the university, developing mechanisms to protect the university from some of the most corrosive forces; or amplifying such external pressures to further their own internal managerial agendas (Deem, 2004; McNay 2008). In addition, the requirement for universities to respond to increasing levels of competition has led to a new category of professional administrators, conceptualised as ‘audit-market’ intermediaries by Enders and Naidoo (2018) as they are pivotal portals for the translation and enactment of externally generated audit and market forces. On the other hand, many also take responsibility for the protection of the public good function of higher education and protect the academic heartland from corrosive market forces. As collegial governance and academic autonomy erodes, this group of new professional administrators takes on a key role in influencing structures and cultures.

The position of academics in various forms of competition are varied and ambiguous. For example, while the submission of higher education to markets has been resisted by some academics (Decuypere and Simons, 2016; Pringle and Naidoo, 2014) for

others it has been highly seductive leading to what Leslie and Slaughter (1997) have referred to as academic capitalism (see also Cantwell and Kauppinen, 2014 and Findlow and Hayes, 2016). Elite academics in general work to co-produce the drivers, structures and templates of status competitions since these are based on criteria dictated by the internal reputational hierarchies that already prevail. Their success validates the political and economic underpinnings of the game (Enders, 2015) at the same time as the academic elite is incorporated to stall protest and help with the pacification and depoliticisation of the sector as a whole.

The final group of actors implicated in the reproduction of competition are students. The reconceptualization of the student as a consumer of higher education has been legitimised by governments as a competitive force that will bring about increased efficiency, quality and diversity (Naidoo et al, 2011). Various consumer levers to enhance student choice and control over the education process have been introduced. These include mechanisms for greater choice and flexibility, student 'satisfaction' surveys and the institutionalisation of complaint mechanisms. Information required by government agencies including performance indicators, benchmarking statements and student throughput rates are also used to facilitate the operation of markets by placing such information in the public domain to strengthen the hand of consumers (Molesworth et al, 2009). In this scenario league tables produced by the media also play a significant role. The rationale is that students will utilise such mechanisms to demand high-quality provision and will apply pressures on academics to make courses more relevant to the skills they require for the workplace. The related assumption is that consumerist forces will have a positive impact on the professional practices of academic staff. High quality will be rewarded and low quality penalised, and consumer choice will foster competition between universities to result in more responsive, inclusive, and better quality teaching.

The strategies and practices of the powerful macro and individual actors discussed above rely on beliefs, values and emotions which must be broadly accepted and remain unbroken for competition to work as a fetish. In the next section I introduce the concept of the 'mind snare' to outline how the belief in competition is maintained and strengthened.

The Mind Snares of Competition

The anthropologist Pierre Smith has analysed the importance of 'mind snares' through which shamans perform rituals to exert power over beliefs, desires, and emotion (Halloy 2015; Smith, 1982). He writes that instead of a clear and exact meaning, the ritual involves an evocative process which simulates and keeps the inferential process idle. This allows the mind to slip and fall into the trap that was set for it.

The first mind snare is that competition is believed to be naturally occurring. Attention is often called to the fact that competition is found in biological evolution (Hodgson and Knudsen, 2006). While more recent research in biological evolution has also drawn attention to collaboration, the perceived all encompassing competition that occurs in the natural world is fused with so called common sense in the social world. In this way, competition becomes a socially approved method of distributing resources and deciding who has access to the best resources. In addition, neoclassical economics has led to the belief in the ability of market competition to solve economic and social problems. This includes the belief that the interests in a given society is best served by allowing citizens to pursue their own self-interest with little restraint (Dequech, 2007). The belief is that market exchange will automatically channel individual self-interest into a form of collective self-interest. This will in turn automatically lead to the greatest efficiency and equity for society as a whole.

These deeply ingrained beliefs come together to elevate competition to the status of doxa, a term Bourdieu applies to refer to an unquestionable orthodoxy that operates as if it were the objective truth. In its presentation as ritual, competition is de-historicised and de-socialised to claim the status of an objective, scientific truth (Bourdieu 1998b). To question competition is therefore likened to insanity. It is also perceived as an act of heresy because competition especially market competition is positioned as central to democracy. The more areas of human life that are subsumed under market competition, the more democratic and civilised societies appear to be.

The second mind snare is that competition is legitimate and just because all participants have an equal opportunity to compete. In relation to universities and countries Riyad Shahjahan and Clara Morgan (2016) demonstrate very powerfully that this is a fallacy. They demonstrate how the OECD, in attempting to implement its Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes, created spaces of equivalence across countries with very different geographic, political and economic contexts. Such contexts were universalized, delocalised and depoliticised so that they could be presented as legitimate comparative measures. Adriansen et al (2015) in their analysis of relations between high and low income countries reveal how global competition valorizes templates that derive from centres of power resulting in the reproduction of the current geopolitics of knowledge.

Meritocratic competition has been positioned as a cornerstone of the university. However, the research of Pierre Bourdieu reveals how decontextualized understandings of meritocracy, conceptualised simplistically as the outcome of innate talent, play a vital role in rendering social advantage invisible while reproducing inequality (Bourdieu, 1988). Meritocracy also endorses a linear, hierarchical system in which the top cannot exist without the bottom (Littler, 2013). Raymond Williams (1958) has argued that the classic meritocratic symbol of the ladder symbolises the opportunity to climb but that individuals can only go up the ladder alone. He asserted that meritocracy has 'sweetened the poison of hierarchy' by appearing to reward for talent rather than money or birth while it weakened community, solidarity and collective wellbeing (Williams 1958: 331).

In many social democratic countries, measures have been implemented to create greater equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged groups. However, even this is being rolled back and a version of meritocracy is rising which is opposed to financial support, to redress and to contextualised systems of merit. Instead as Jo Littler argues (2013), meritocracy is unashamedly tied to elitism and plutocracy.

The fourth mind snare works through a potent affective economy (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012). Katja Brogger's (2016) research on how monitoring techniques ignite a strong competitive desire by instilling a fear of shame and the thrill of fame is seminal in this regard. Managers, academics and students all work to co-produce the drivers, structures and templates of competition fuelled by powerful emotions

which Espeland and Saunders (2016) have referred to as engines of anxiety. In this way, winners and losers are entangled in an affective economy which incorporates various forms of peer review, but with the terms of the competition largely set from outside academia.

In addition, it is now a moral imperative to be willing to enter the competition. Academics and students are encouraged to pursue their self-interest and maximize their gains. Those who are unable to enter higher education are referred to as lacking aspiration. Lauren Belant (2011) refers to cruel optimism which is the affective state produced under neoliberal culture. It is cruel because it encourages an attachment to the idea of a better future while the reality of neoliberalism actively blocks the fulfilment of such aspirations for the majority of people. An important cohort study (Curran and Hill, 2017) suggests a correlation between neoliberal governance (which has forced young people into ever-increasing competition with one another under the auspices of meritocracy and the watchful eye of increasingly demanding parents), and an environment in which securities and insecurities of personal experience are continuously generated. The researchers note that this has in turn led to unhealthy forms of perfectionism with the potential to generate severe psychological difficulties.

Consequences

While competition can enhance diversity, quality and access in some areas of social life under regulated conditions, there is increasing evidence that unfettered competition can also generate extreme inequalities. Competition can also lead to precarious communities and produce an unprecedented intimacy between capital and governments (Brown, 2015). Competition privatises public goods and eliminates shared and equal access to them (Bourdieu, 1998b). As Holmwood and Balon (2018) argue, the consequences are no less dramatic and wide-ranging in higher education. In the next section I will focus on three negative consequences.

The first consequence is inequality. The different forms of competition interact to reproduce old hierarchies and channel new forms of inequality inside and across national higher education systems (Dale, 2016; Marginson, 2016; Pusser, 2001). These are competitions that are always rigged towards the elite. At the apex of this

competition, the battle for 'world-class' university status,' rages on. It is a battle that is fought between the most elite universities in the most powerful countries (Ordorika and Lloyd 2015; Naidoo 2017). Barbara Kehm (2013) has shown how the German Excellence initiative has resulted in more stratification, a downgrading of teaching and an additional administrative burden. In highly stratified systems, there is no downward trickle but an upward spiral of resources and status. The elite is consolidated while everything else is undermined. This results in what I have termed the combined and uneven development of higher education worldwide (Naidoo 2014). High status, well resourced universities in poorer countries are intimately connected to the global power nodes of higher education. At the same time, there is a proliferation of under-resourced universities in rich countries which recruit the most disadvantaged students and which are detached from power and confined to their locality (Brown et al, 2015; Naidoo, 2014).

However, the most important consequence of competition is the legitimization of inequality. Politicians never say 'we need more inequality'. Rather they say we need more competition even though there is increasing evidence that it is precisely the decades of competition policies that have been unthinkingly deployed in the absence of protective regulation that drives up inequality (Davies, 2016). Competition thus acts as a mechanism through which the wealthy and the powerful draw on deeply inscribed beliefs to reproduce inequality while which at the same time concealing intergroup stratification. The so called invisible hand of competition provide the means by which no-one is responsible for negative effects apart from the victims themselves.

The second impact is on academic work. The various competition frameworks engage those working in higher education in a struggle to define the very worth of higher education. Market and status competitions, for example, have the potential to colonise epistemic and professional frameworks linked to scientific capital (Alvesson et al 2017). Collini refers to this as 'a kind of mercantilism of the intellect' in which academics internalise the centrality of national economic competitiveness and which he argues is detrimental to the intrinsically co-operative nature of scholarship (Collini (2012: 26). Mark Olssen (2016) has shown how the research excellence framework in the United Kingdom militates against 'blue skies' research, encourages dubious research tactics for maximizing citations and over-encourages conformity to

systems of external expectations. He suggests that the effects of introducing a measure of impact has devalored certain disciplines, particularly the humanities.

The transformation of higher education into a status and economic commodity is likely to further de-professionalise and harden the stratification within the academic profession. Academic work is likely to be configured into standardised units which can be priced and sold; knowledge is likely to be codified, tasks standardised and outputs quantified. Academic work is also more likely to be subject to managerial principles for supervision and control. While an academic elite may be able to engage in symbolic compliance, resistance and buffering, a growing number of academics particularly those who are younger, are likely to be perceived as exchangeable and disposable. They are likely to face work intensification, lack of autonomy and insecurity (Brennan et al, 2017).

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England is the newest reform in a cascade of neo-liberal market reforms. Current metrics which act as proxies for teaching quality include students' employment after graduating and student satisfaction indicators from the National Student Survey. Universities deemed to have 'excellent' teaching are rewarded with the right to increase undergraduate fees. But as Joshua Forstenzer (2016) has argued, the TEF is less about teaching quality and more about allowing universities to charge differential fees; and it is less about students and more about an imagined group of employers. It also ignores the impact of social class and university status on employment success as well as contemporary transformations in the global labour market which impact on graduate employment (see Brown et al 2010). Even more fundamentally, it avoids the question of how a focus on student satisfaction can actually lower quality. There are grave concerns that the reconceptualization of students as consumers has the potential to result in students gaining a sense of false entitlement, abdicating responsibility for their education and opting for instrumental learning (Molesworth et al, 2009). David James (2017) has indicated the importance of professional identity in high quality learning. In this scenario, the professional identity of academic faculty is undermined and academics are likely to opt for safe, risk-free spoon-feeding teaching. There is also the potential for gaming strategies to enhance student satisfaction scores.

The competition fetish, with its imperative for universities to enhance the competitive edge of each country in the global marketplace also threatens the capacity of higher education to work towards global wellbeing. This combines with the obsession to move up the ladder of world class rankings to prove global esteem. As mentioned previously, all of this merely serves to feed the national competition fetish while legitimating the weakening national systems of higher education as a whole. This is also a major problem globally since many of the major issues facing humankind such as the destruction of the environment, rising inequality and violence across borders can only be solved by countries and universities working together. In this sense, the question of how higher education contributes to global wellbeing becomes very important. The competition fetish which presents itself as nation bound, and running largely on economic tracks hinders the great potential that universities have to work together to solve the pressing problems which threaten higher education as a global community.

In the next section I turn to an exploration of some of the ways in which we can respond to the most corrosive effects of the competition fetish.

Beyond the Competition Fetish

It is important to avoid a nostalgic view of a golden age of higher education before new forms of competition entered the higher education arena. Higher education has always contributed to enhancing equality as well as reproducing inequality. Teaching has often suffered because of the relatively higher status of research and quality has been uneven as higher education systems have transformed into mass systems. However, it is important to understand what has caused these issues and the extent to which competition can provide solutions to these problems.

It is also important to acknowledge that not all competition is negative. Traditional academic competition revolving around scientific capital has resulted in major intellectual advances. More recently, new types of competition have been suggested which change definitions of success and reward universities for value-added work such as recruiting disadvantaged students and enabling them to succeed.

This article, however, aims to challenge the idea of competition as a fetish. I am arguing against the idea that different types of competition can be unthinkingly applied to answer all the unsolved problems of higher education. My concern is that competition has become so powerful that other ways of organising, such as collective action, co-ordination or planning are rendered obsolete and described at best as quaintly old fashioned; or at worst as anti-democratic. It is thus important to develop theoretical and empirical research which interrogates the idea that competition in all areas of higher education will result in equity and quality. Evidence-based decisions need to be made in relation to which aspects of higher education may benefit from what types of competition and which areas of higher education need to be protected from competition.

In relation to global wellbeing, while important research foundations are being signalled (see for example Marginson, 2017) robust theoretical resources to examine the relationship between higher education and collective global goods are still in early stages of development. We have not moved very far from economic definitions which are not very helpful because global goods do not occur naturally in society but are socially constructed and always amenable to contestation and negotiation. Historically, analyses have also remained heavily reliant on the role of the state in securing such goods and many accounts depict state actors across countries working collectively. Research in general also remains wedded to the strong division in mission between public, private and for profit provision. However, the diminishing role of governments in securing collective social welfare and the blurring division in mission between public, private and for profit universities points to the need for the reconceptualization of such relations.

Research is also required to challenge the neo-classical economic view that individuals are only capable of acting out of self-interest and that there is no alternative to competition. In his book *The Moral Economy*, Samuel Bowles (2016) persuasively argues that appeals made to our self-interest can undercut intrinsic moral impulses and cause institutions to work sub-optimally. Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to win the nobel prize for economics together with her colleagues has documented thousands of cases of people collaborating for the greater good (Ostrom, 2015). She challenged the idea that people are trapped in competitive individualistic behaviour which in the end will destroy common natural resources. For

example, two communities living on fishing by a great lake are expected to compete to fish the lake until it is fished dry. Her own extensive field research in Nepal, Spain, Japan and Indonesia revealed that people are not the greedy, selfish actors of standard economic theory. Her fieldwork offered examples of individuals coming together to decide on quotas of fish or using fish nets with larger holes so that young fish are not caught. They developed rules and trust and sanctions. In these ways, a natural resource was made available for their childrens' children. Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators revealed to the world that individuals can organise themselves in combination with diverse polycentric organisations beyond the state and beyond the market to share and sustain rather than compete and deplete.

In higher education, day to day life shows hundreds of examples of compassion, courage and collaboration despite the pressures that push individuals to be selfish and competitive. There are also inspirational examples of resistance in countries such as Mexico (Parraguez Sanchez, 2016) while research intensive universities in Colombia are collaborating to develop major peace programmes which include incorporating former illegal combatants into higher education (Restrepo and Naidoo, 2017). In addition, the movement for cooperative universities stands as a very interesting challenge to the competition fetish. Winn (2015) and Neary (2014) have indicated the promises of co-operative education in the Social Science Centre at the University of Lincoln in the United Kingdom. A more established higher education cooperative is the University of Mondragon which was founded in 1997 in the Basque Country in northern Spain. A delegation of academics undertook a field trip to Mondragon and have hailed the university as a highly successful alternative to 'neoliberalised university formations'. They stated '*It is possible to create and manage successful universities that do not involve the exploitation of faculty as passive employees and the treatment of students as mere clients*' (Wright et al, 2011: 54 and Wright and Greenwood, 2017).

To conclude, higher education is too important to be left to a fetish. Bourdieu has written very powerfully about how neoliberalism has systematically destroyed collectives (Bourdieu, 1998). I have argued elsewhere that the funnelling of the lion's share of resources into building world class universities starves higher education systems as a whole and undermines the potential to build high quality and equitable systems that rewards institutions with diverse missions. Rather than building world

class universities, the focus should be on building world class systems which contribute to social and economic development for all (Naidoo, 2018). The higher education community as a whole needs to find ways through research, teaching and community engagement to re-collectivise. The small and big acts of resistance need to be sustained. There is an urgency to come together as policy makers, researchers, teachers, managers and students to build new visions and alternative w

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